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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine Anglo-American and Mexican-American parents' attitudes about infant socialization. Occupational status of fathers was used to identify participants' social class, and mothers and fathers were interviewed in English or Spanish 9 weeks after the birth of their first child. Attitudes were examined regarding babies' cries. Overall, participants demonstrated more similarities than differences in attitudes about infants' cries, although women distinguished more types of cries than did men. Most participants identified hunger cries; many also distinguished cries for attention, discomfort, and anger. Many more middle-class than working-class fathers of both ethnic groups claimed to recognize anger cries. About two-thirds of the parents in each group believed certain infant behaviors should be discouraged, but examples varied. Mexican-American parents tended to discourage poor social behaviors (such as demanding constant attention), whereas Anglo-Americans discouraged self-damaging behaviors (such as head banging). Although Anglo-Americans preferred distraction as a means of behavior control, no other particular method was singled out. Most parents believed infants could be taught such things as verbal and social skills, but ethnic differences emerged as to which types of infant stimulation should be provided (Anglos felt positive about providing toys and books). Overall, similarities outweighed differences in attitudes, and social class was more often associated with parents' responses than was ethnic origin. (Author/DB)

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A CROSS CULTURAL COMPARISON OF PARENTAL ATTITUDES TOWARD ASPECTS OF INFANT SOCIALIZATION

Paper presented at the 1981 Annual
Convention of the
American Psychological Association

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Centro Familiar de Santa Barbara

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I would like to begin my discussion, as an anthropologist at a psychologists' convention, by observing that there may be no subject area which draws our two disciplines closer together than the subject of socialization. Although we approach this subject from variant perspectives---as a cultural anthropologist, I am especially interested in the processes by which the norms, values, behaviors, symbols and concepts which make up a culture are transmitted to its participants--- and as psychologists you are concerned with the processes which shape personality and guide the emotional and cognitive development of individuals---we are both intimately concerned with the dynamics of socialization. Our mutuality of interest is further underscored when we are dealing with the unique insights offered to both disciplines through the contrasts and comparisons of cross-cultural socialization research.

This paper summarizes findings in an examination of the attitudes and ideas about infant socialization processes expressed by 107 first-time parents. Approximately half of the parents are Anglo American and half are Mexican American; these ethnic samples are further broken down into white collar and blue collar sub-samples based on the occupations of the fathers. Prenatal classes at hospitals and clinics provided the names of some of the parents, but a majority were obtained from the newspaper birth lists of all babies born at the city's two maternity hospitals.

The study was undertaken in 1978-1979 in an urban Southern California setting. The major thrust of the study was not an inquiry into socialization practices but was an examination of the integration into and support derived from formal and informal helping networks experienced by couples at the time of their transition to parenthood. The data on socialization attitudes and practices was gathered for fuller understanding of the total context of this transitional period.

Method

Material under discussion here was obtained in an interview of the mothers and fathers approximately nine weeks following childbirth. It was the third and final data-gathering instrument used with the parents. The parents had a choice of English or Spanish language interview formats and interviews with Mexican American parents were conducted by bilingual, second generation Chicanas.

Characteristics of the Sample

As anticipated, the class/ethnic groups varied widely on several socio-economic dimensions. All middle class Mexican and Anglo Americans had educations beyond high school, family incomes in excess of $15,000 per annum, were older and had been married longer than their working class counterparts. Most blue collar Anglo Americans had completed high school and had family incomes of between $10,000 and $15,000 per annum. Blue collar Mexican Americans parents, about two-thirds of whom were Mexican born, usually had not completed high school; most had incomes of below $10,000 a year, and many were predominantly Spanish speaking.

What all these men and women had in common, however, was that they had just experienced the birth of their first child and they were coping with the changes and stresses of the initial weeks of parenthood. Moreover, women in the four groups did not vary significantly in the amount or kind of actual childcare experience they had had prior to the births of their babies. Mexican American men of both social classes, however, reported more prior experience with infants than Anglo men. In terms of formal preparation for parenthood, all of the middle class parents in both ethnic groups had attended childbirth preparation or parent education activities, 93% of the working class Anglos had done so as had 48% of the working class Mexican American parents.

It is often a temptation in analyzing the results of cross-cultural research to emphasize only the differences across cultural groups---after all, it is the differences that create discrete cultures and justify a cross-cultural focus in the first place. But stressing only contrasts tends to produce cultural stereotypes and causes us to overlook equally meaningful intra-cultural variation. Most importantly, such an emphasis causes us to ignore the vast number of commonalities that bind us together in the human experience. In this paper I will discuss the expressed attitudes of parents on three aspects of infant socialization: responsiveness to the cries of babies, controlling undesirable behavior in infants, and providing stimulation in the environments of infants. The responses of the parents amply demonstrate the interplay of cross-cultural and intra-cultural variation and consensus.

Parental Responsiveness to Babies' Cries.

Several questions were asked the parents in order to get a general picture of their attitudes and responses concerning their babies' cries. The parents were first asked if their babies seemed to have different types of cries for different situations and if so, to name the t pes of cries they could distinguish. Following this, they were asked to estimate the usual length of time between their baby's initial cry and their response. Finally, they were asked what their response would be if their fed and dry baby continued to cry for no apparent reason.

In all class/ethnic groups, women were able to name more distinct baby cries than their husbands. A majority of men and women identified a hunger cry and many also distinguished cries for attention, discomfort cries, and anger cries. An interesting, though somewhat inexplicable finding was that many more middle class than working class fathers of both ethnic groups claimed to recognize a distinctive anger cry ($x^2=7.9$, 1 df, $p<.01$)!

No systematic variation was found across ethnic groups with respect to the number or kind of cries identified by parents,, and no appreciable class variance was found among the Anglo American parents. However, the fathers and mothers in the white collar Mexican American sample were generally able to distinguish a much wider variety of cries than were the blue collar Mexican Americans ($x^2=8.5$, 2 df, $p<.02$). There was, in fact, more variation on this measure across the Hispanic samples than across the ethnic groups, because, of all parents, the middle class Mexican Americans were most attune to differences in their babies' cries and blue collar Mexican Americans were the least (see Tables I and II).

Furthermore, we found little systematic variance across ethnic or class groups in the parents' assessment of the usual amount of time that elapsed between the onset of their infant's cries and their own responses. Similar mother/father differences were apparent across all the samples, however, with fathers on the whole claiming greater alacrity in responding to their offsprings' communications

than mothers. Many fathers reported an "immediate" response, while their wives reported that they responded within five minutes. Moreover, women, especially Anglo women, often reported that their response time was variable--contingent on the nature of the babies cries.

Anglo American middle class parents presented a significant contrast to the other parent groups in their responses to the hypothetical fed, dry, but continously crying baby. While over 93% of the parents in other groups claimed they would pick up, pat, or check the baby again, 25% of these fathers and 26% of the mothers opted for letting the baby cry (x^2=15.5, 3 df, p=<.01). (Table III). There were no other ethnic or class-related differences in responses to this question.

Overall, then, in their concepts about and reported responses to the cries of their babies, Mexican American and Anglo American parents demonstrated more similarities than differences. Moreover, the class-linked variation observed was within, not across, ethnic groups, demonstrating considerable intra-group heterogeneity.

Controlling Undesirable Behaviors in an Infant.

In exploring parental attitudes regarding undesirable behaviors in infants and the means by which ~~they~~ parents would undertake to control such behaviors, we first wished to determine whether there were contrasts in the degree to which parents in the four groups considered babies under one year of age capable of producing behavior that needed to be actively discouraged. About two-thirds of the parents in each class/ethnic group did, infact, feel that babies could behave in ways that should be discouraged. There were no sex-related differences on this variable--about the same number of men and women held this belief.

Parents were subsequently asked to list behaviors that would require parental intervention. A wide variety of behaviors were mentioned by the respondents, though only about 25% of the parents who listed behaviors listed more than one. Here an interesting ethnic trend was observable: Mexican American parents tended

to list more undesirable behaviors than Anglo American parents (see Table IV). Moreover, within the Mexican American sample itself, more blue collar parents (33%) listed several undesirable behaviors than did their middle class counterparts (23%). No similar class difference was seen among the responses of Anglo American parents.

More clear cut, however, were ethnic differences in the kinds of untoward infant behaviors parents felt they would want to modify. As an inspection of Table V discloses, Mexican American parents stressed socially oriented behaviors while Anglo Americans emphasized self damaging or unsafe behavior. Types of poor social behavior mentioned by parents included demanding constant attention, disrespect of parents, disobedience, selfishness, and bad manners. Among the self damaging behaviors mentioned were thumb and finger sucking, head banging, getting into unsafe substances or situations, getting dirty, and bedwetting.

While the variation in reprehensible infant behaviors emphasized by parents from the two ethnic groups isn't dramatic, the interethnic contrast was found across both the middle and working classes. This finding suggests that, even at this very early stage of socialization, there is a distinct ethnic difference in the kinds of behavior upon which parents focus their disciplinary efforts: a difference in orientation toward others as contrasted with self.

Carrying out our exploration of these issues further, we asked the parents what actions they would consider appropriate to control unwanted behavior manifested by their babies. In analyzing parents answers, we were unable to isolate any distinct contrasts in the number or range of parents' disciplinary measures. The repertoires of disciplinary methods was quite extensive: verbal reprimanding was the most frequently mentioned method both by sex and by class; other methods included spanking, ignoring, setting alternative examples, distracting, and isolating the offending baby. Despite the extensive array of options, no group appeared to be partial to a particular method or set of methods of behavior control, with one

notable exception: Anglo American parents of both social classes demonstated a clear preference for using distraction as a means of behavior control (x^2=9.5, 1 df, p= .01). The reason for this preference is suggested by the nature of the behaviors found most problematic by Anglo parents--behavior, that is, unsafe or self-damaging behavior. Distracting a baby from unsafe activities or activities that parents think is harmful (e.g. thumb-sucking) by providing alternative activities may make better sense to these parents than example setting or verbal reprimands and explanations because the behavior is situation-specific and probably won't carry over into similar future situations as social behavior might.

We further asked each parent if he or she felt it was all right to pick up a baby each time it cried. With this question we sought to determine whether or not parents felt that a consistent response to the baby's cries would reinforce crying or "spoil" the baby. (Although we carefully did not introduce the word "spoil," it certainly emerged in most of the parents' answers anyway!). This question evoked three kinds of answers from parents: a yes or a no, or an age-qualified answer. Parents who responded with the latter felt that picking up a very young baby at every cry was o.k., but as a baby grew older, such a response might spoil the baby.

Overall, the fathers in each group were more likely to feel that a baby should not be picked up at each cry than the mothers. And, Mexican American parents were distinctly more likely than Anglo Americans to believe that frequent picking up was not a good thing to do (see Table VI.). In this table we see that white collar Mexican American parents are in an intermediate position between the blue collar Hispanics and the Anglo Americans on this variable. This ethnic difference appears to be consistent with the Mexican American parents' concern with curbing overly-demanding behavior mentioned earlier.

Generally, then, we found that there was significant variation in the types of infant behavior towards which these first-time parents of differing ethnicity believed they should focus their disciplinary attention and a slight

difference in the methods they would use as well.

Providing A Stimulating Environment for Infants.

When these parents were asked whether or not they felt it was possible to teach anything to an infant under one year of age, a majority of the parents in all groups answered in the affirmative. Further, their answers to the follow-up request to list the kinds of things babies could be taught yielded no apparent ethnic or class related differences in number, range, or kinds of learnings. Most parents were similar in their emphasis on motor activities such as sitting up, standing, and walking, and many mentioned social and verbal skills.

Clear-cut ethnic differences did emerge, however, when the parents were questioned about the importance of introducing specific types of stimulation into their babies' environments. Most particularly did these differences appear when parents were questioned about the importance of toys or play objects, reading or picture books, and the desirability of having persons other than the parents care for and interact with the babies.

Table VII summarizes the parents's responses to the forced choice question: "How important do you think it is for an infant under six months old to have toys or objects to look at or feel?" Here we see that a majority of Anglo Americans in both social classes consider such objects as absolutely essential, while the Mexican American parents consider such objects as important but not essential. Parents were also asked to list age-appropriate toys, but no class or ethnic differences were found in their listings.

A similar variation across ethnic groups is observable in Table VIII in which are summed the parents' responses to the forced choice question: "How important do you feel it is for parents to read or show picture books to a baby under twelve months old?" Blue collar Hispanics, especially tend not to rate books high in importance, and, given the lower educations of the parents in this group, this rating is understandable.

Finally, as seen in Table IX, fewer Mexican American than Anglo American parents feel it essential that babies interact with persons other than their parents, and quite a large proportion of blue collar Mexican Americans consider this aspect of a baby's environment not important at all.

Although, within the ethnic groups, there is class variance on the responses to all of these questions concerned with techniques for infant stimulation and environmental enrichment, the differences associated with ethnicity are most obvious and very consis tent. Since parents in all of the groups were about equally convinced of the possibility of teaching infants, the differences in importance attributed to these specific kinds of stimulation must not arise out of variation in parents' evaluation of their infants' abilities to learn. Time and the focus of the study did not allow for an exploration of parents' attitudes on a wide variety of stimulation techniques, thus the variation due to ethnicity on just these three should be viewed cautiously.

Conclusion

Because we recorded the expressed attitudes and ideas of parents who differed by social class within both ethnic groups, we were able to get a clearer idea of which parental attitudes were associated with the ethnic origin of the parents and which seemed to be more strongly linked to their class standing. We identified several parental attitudes and concepts that did appear to be more strongly associated with ethnic identity than class. On the other hand, many of these same associations were modified by class differences within the ethnic groups; several attitudes and concepts were linked solely to class and not ethnicity. And, there were many ideas and precepts that were commonly held by all parents of whatever class or ethnic background. In short, thes data do not provide substantiation for consistent and well-defined ethnically based socialization norms or patterns.

Table I. Number of Baby Cries Distinguished by Mothers Classified by Mothers' Social Class and Ethnicity.

Number of Cries	Class/Ethnic Group %BCMA(N=31)	%WCMA(N=14)	%BCAA(N=30)	%WCAA(N=32)
None or one	29	7	10	12
Two	29	36	57	47
Three or more	42	57	33	41
Totals	100	100	100	100

Table II. Number of Baby Cries Distinguished by Fathers Classified by Fathers' Social Class and Ethnicity.

Number of Cries	Class/Ethnic Group %BCMA(N=31)	%WCMA(N=14)	%BCAA(N=30)	%WCAA(N=32)
None or one	42	14	33.3	41
Two	29	36	33.3	34
Three or more	29	50	33.3	25
Totals	100	100	99.9	100

Table III. Parental Response to Continual Cry Classified by Parents' Social Class and Ethnicity.

Response	Class/Ethnic Group %BCMA(N=60)	%WCMA(N=28)	%BCAN(N=56)	%WCAA(N=63)
Let cry	6	7	5	25
Comfort or check	94	93	95	75
Totals	100	100	100	100

$x^2=15.5, p= .01$

IV. Number of "Bad" Behaviors Cited By Parents Classified By Parents' Ethnic Group

Number of Behaviors	Ethnic Group %Mexican American(N=56)	%Anglo Americans(N=74)
One	70	82
Two or more	30	18
Totals	100	100

$x^2=3.0$, $p=<.10$

Table V. Type of "Bad" Behavior Emphasized by Parents by Parents' Ethnic Group

Type of Behavior	Ethnic Group %Mexican American(N=80)*	%Anglo American (N=88)*
Social	60	40
Self-damaging or unsafe	40	60
Totals	100	100

* Total N behaviors cited by this group.

$x^2=6.9$, $p=<.02$

Table VII. Picking Up Baby Leads to Spoiling: Answers Classified by Parents' Class and Ethnic group.

	Class/Ethnic Group %BCMA(N=62)	%WCMA(N=28)	%BCAA(N=60)	%WCAA(N=64)
No	48	43	58	66
Age qualified	4	21	14	9
Yes	48	36	28	25
Totals	100	100	100	100

$x^2=14.4$, $p=<.05$

Table VII. The Importance of Toys or Play Objects By Class/Ethnic Group.

Assessed Importance	%BCMA(N=62)	%WCMA(N=28)	%BCAA(N=60)	%WCAA(N=64)
Absolutely Essential	21	25	43	56
Important	66	68	52	44
Not Important	13	7	0	0
Totals	100	100	100	100

$x^2=31.5$, $p<.001$

Table VIII. The Importance of Reading or Showing Picture Books to Baby Class/Ethnic Group.

Assessed Importance	%BCMA(N=62)	%WCMA(N=26)	%BCAA(N=60)	%WCAA(N=62)
Absolutely Essential	10	0	32	42
Important	65	96	62	52
Not Important	25	4	6	6
Totals	100	100	100	100

$x^2=41.3$, $p<.001$

Table IX. Importance of Interaction with Persons Other Than Parents By Class/Ethnic Group.

Assessed Importance	%BCMA(N=61)	%WCMA(N=28)	%BCAA(N=60)	%WCAA(N=63)
Absolutely Essential	5	14	23	25
Important	54	75	63	57
Not Important	41	11	13	17
Totals	100	100	99	99

$x^2=24.9$, $p<.001$